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## Our Substitute for Nature

By ALFRED MANSFIELD BROOKS

TWO institutions, our schools and our museums bear witness to the interest of our time in art. By schools I mean everything from the primary to postgraduate university level, including the special art schools attached to so many of our art museums. In the main, the museums seek to teach (they lay stress on their educational character for reasons as obvious as they are numerous, mostly legitimate) through the eye, while the schools, in the ordinarily accepted sense of the word, make their appeal chiefly through the ear. Of both, the prime purpose is to increase love of art among the people as a whole. The secondary purpose is to make artists. Both purposes are highly creditable and, no candid person will deny, in some measure attained. This is all commonplace.

It may be taken for granted that truth, honesty, sincerity are at the root of all art. To put it in another way, all art, worthy the name, is the expression of truth and the love of truth precipitated by the human reagent from that complex solution of ideas and things called life and the world. Then what of the innumerable counterfeit and spurious necessities and ornaments, described by Rodin as inferior products manufactured cheaply in order to give adulterated luxuries to the greatest number, with which the rank and file of us are completely environed, with which the most artistic of us—artistic rich as well as artistic poor—are for the greater part environed? I refrain, for the sake of common civility, from drawing the conclusions, knowing the while that they have been drawn with far greater force than I command by artists like Rodin and by writers like

Clive Bell, not to name other Jeremiahs of lamentable truths about the present state of art.

"What," you exclaim, "what, if anything, can be done about it?" That is open-minded and straightforward, and the fact that neither I nor anybody else can answer is of comparatively little significance. The danger lies with those smug ones who willfully close eyes and mind to the fact that there is anything at all the matter with art, its production, its acceptance, its teaching; the danger from these is deathly. What of this teaching of art, visual (word to conjure with these days) and the older vocal teaching, teaching done in schools, colleges, and museums? Much good can be truly said of it upon the condition that we keep ever in mind the fact that its sole purpose is to spread what is generally accepted for education and cultivation, and not to spread conditions in which uneducated and uncultivated people may grow up and live surrounded by nature unruined by smoke, noise, and haste, conditions under which even city children may grow up within a stone's throw of open land, cultivated and uncultivated, where shall be clean water pools and running streams under blue skies by day, starry by night, where, in a word, nature, from which emotion comes (emotion, the vital principle of art) shall not be utterly cut off. The very means which we have set up for creating the wealth which has made our educational institutions possible have cut off the great majority from the fountain head and source of vitality in art. This admitted and the fact allowed that the institutions in question have not been to blame, consciously, at least, it is greatly to their credit to be doing what they can (many are doing nothing, many more but very little) to replace the joy of living, the beauty of nature, inspirer of art, the possible creators and creation of art alike, by the best possible collections of substitutes. Since nature herself is taken away, that which is based on nature and is true to her, art, we should be deeply grateful for as viewed behind the museum glass and expounded by men of highly specialized learning. All real art is a gloss upon nature. The point is that without nature to gloss we can expect no real art. With the source cut off, the stock in hand must

diminish no matter how jealously guarded. For gone are the conditions which produced:

“Beneath yon birch with silver bark  
And boughs so pendulous and fair,  
The brook falls scattered down the rock,  
And all is mossy there.”

And: “The little brooks that from the green hills of the Casentin run down into the Arno, making their channels cool and soft . . .” And: “The winter is past and the time of the singing of birds is come.”

In fine, for the creation or the appreciation of art, conditions must be right, that is, natural. Our effort, making the best of a bad job, is to create artificial conditions while we neglect the natural, namely, the possible artists, implicit in the men or women to be, and the sole source of their emotion if they are to arrive, nature.

Since the scenes that moved the authors of the above fragments of nature poetry are actually destroyed, or their elements far removed from most of us, since the actualities that inspired Rembrandt and Corot have been obliterated by the heavy tread of civilization, which Rear Admiral Fiske has recently called twin brother of war (war, remember, meaning destruction and ruin), it is well that the schools and museums go on collecting and exposing to view, and impressing as best they can upon our minds the fine things of the truly artistic past, things which make for present education and culture, but not for fresh art. Unfortunately, in this connection, we are reminded that the institutions of higher education are expensive, while the museums, as a rule, are located far from the haunts and homes of the common people and the poor. When, in such regions, a branch museum is set up, the things exhibited are not of the best. “It would be dangerous to risk really valuable things,” chant trustees, directors, and curators in perfect unison. While I am well aware of the justice of the chant, the grim fact remains unchanged. I am reminded of a college party of which I heard, planned for girls not, well, let us say, not exactly in society, those who were working their way through, whereat it was suggested that

the hostesses wear only their second-best clothes. In a word, it was to be a second-best party for seconds.

But that half a loaf, even crumbs, is not better than no bread, I would be the last to maintain; only, frankly to face your crumbs and not to call them a loaf is to describe what we are and are not doing in respect to much of our art activity at the present time. Dollars, by millions, spent on collecting (collecting and luxury have ever gone hand in hand, not collecting and that state of mind which, at the urge of nature, results in fresh art) and elucidating are no true gauge for measuring the art spirit of the country, though they will do for measuring, in the sense of an inventory, our artistic possessions. But since we are at present seeking to give education and cultivation in art by processes of mental inoculation, by patronage, and by academic and docent training, there is one important means to our end which is neglected and which should be reintroduced into our process. I say "reintroduced" because it was formerly there. I refer to copying and committing to memory.

From primary grade to the top of the educational ladder (figure peculiarly dear to the powers that have state education in charge) every student should be made to commit to memory passages of good poetry and prose, should be kept, during a considerable part of all his art time, at copying, a form and a means of committing to memory, good drawings by the best artists, living and dead. Single flowers and stalks, in pure line or line and hatched shade, columbine, strawberry, violet, by Dürer or Leonardo; arms, heads, knees, by Michelangelo; draperies and single folds by Raphael, and not less by Giotto; patterns, grapes and leaves, birds and animals, from Byzantine ivories and Persian illuminations; the abstract lines of thirteenth and fourteenth century missal capitals; etchings by Rembrandt; landscape drawings by Titian and Turner; architecture by Girtin—these are but a few of the many which will occur to the well equipped mind. They are without number, nor do I mean that color subjects should not also be made use of for copying. I am, of course, aware that the mere proposal will be anathema to many, their reason,

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if they condescend to give any, being the fear or certainty that copying and committing to memory will standardize technique and kill imagination. I have asked many teachers, high and low. I have a group of answers before me, of which the tenor is all to this effect. I do not mean to argue the case but shall close with a word to the specific point from Sir Joshua Reynolds, and another to the general point from Marcus Aurelius.

“Invention is one of the great marks of genius; but if we consult experience, we shall find that it is by being conversant with the experience of others that we learn to invent, as by reading the thoughts of others we learn to think.”

“It is a precept of the Ephesian philosophers that we should always furnish our memory with some eminent examples of ancient virtue.”